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# Report of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics

## Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the newly established Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics. The Commission may wish to review the proposed terms of reference and plan of work of the Interagency Working Group.

* E/CN.3/2004/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2003, Supplement No. 4* (E/2003/24), chap. IV, para. 2 (h).

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# Report of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics

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# I. Introduction

1. The Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session agreed that the United Nations Statistics Division should set up an interagency working group on environment statistics, with a special focus on the development and harmonization of methods, concepts and standards, coordination of data collection and training. The present document is the report of the first meeting of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics, at which the topics for the consideration of the Working Group were its objectives, its terms of reference, plan of work, as well as plans for the period 2004-2005.

2. The first meeting of the Interagency Working Group was held in Paris, on 18 December 2003, at the invitation of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), back-to-back with the meeting of the OECD Working Group on Environmental Information and Outlooks. The international organizations/ agencies participating in the meeting included the United Nations Statistics Division, OECD, the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

3. It was recognized at the meeting that despite significant developments in international environment statistics, much work, both methodological and practical, remained to be done. Progress in work on environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development as well as work on integrated environmental and economic accounting is still hindered by the lack of sufficient good-quality, relevant and timely basic environmental data.

4. Some of the major reasons behind this situation are the lack of harmonized and globally relevant methods, concepts, definitions and classifications; insufficient information and guidance on best practices; insufficient training and capacity-building; and problems of coordination at both the national and the international level.

5. The creation of the Interagency Working Group should enable the enhanced coordination of international work in the field, by helping to establish cooperative working relations in the areas where the avoidance of unnecessary duplication and the pooling of resources can provide faster progress. Against this background, the Group agreed on the following objectives, terms of reference and programme of work.

# II. Objectives, terms of reference and plan of work

6. The main objective of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics is to firmly anchor environment statistics as part of official statistics by improving and strengthening basic environmental data, and thus to make an important contribution to the development of environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development and integrated environmental and economic accounting.

7. The Group intends to accomplish its objective by enhancing cooperation and by the pooling of knowledge bases and resources in the areas of methodological work, data collection and dissemination, training and capacity-building, and the organization of joint events.

8. The Interagency Working Group will take fully into account relevant work of other international networks and forums, and give priority to the specific areas set out below.

**Improvement of methodological practices in international environment statistics**

9. The Interagency Working Group will focus on consolidating work in those subject areas that are fairly advanced, through the dissemination of international recommendations on definitions and methodologies, guidelines and best practices. It will identify priority areas for further methodological work and initiate work in those areas by organizing subgroups and providing a regular forum for discussion and exchange of expertise.

**Harmonization of international environmental data collection**

10. The Interagency Working Group will review international data collection mechanisms in priority areas of environment and sustainable development information and, where appropriate, will draw up proposals to streamline and to further harmonize international data collection through the application of joint data collection activities such as questionnaires, the establishment of shared responsibilities and distribution of work among its members at both the geographical and the subject-matter level.

**Technical cooperation, training and capacity-building**

11. The members of the Interagency Working Group will participate in each others' technical cooperation activities as appropriate and feasible and undertake joint technical cooperation projects to make better use of the knowledge base and resources available at each international organization.

**Organization of joint events**

12. The Interagency Working Group will organize, when appropriate and feasible, joint events (seminars, workshops) to enhance communication about and raise the profile of environmental data issues, promote the exchange of information, particularly concerning best practices in important subject areas, and further discussions on selected issues in environment statistics.

## III. Organization of work

13. The permanent members of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics are in principle those international organizations or agencies that have a well-established international programme on environment statistics including direct and regular collection of comprehensive environment statistics from countries. The initial members of the Group are the United Nations Statistics Division, OECD, Eurostat, ECE and UNEP. The Interagency Working Group can extend membership to other interested organizations with international environment statistics programmes.

14. International organizations or agencies that have programmes focusing on specific areas of environment statistics as well as countries with outstanding experience should be associated with the work of the Interagency Working Group as required and feasible and will be invited on an ad hoc basis to join the subgroups set up by the Working Group on a geographic or subject-matter basis.

15. The Interagency Working Group will maintain strong collaboration with other groups active in related fields, and in particular with the London Group on Environmental Accounting, as well as with groups working on indicators of sustainable development.

16. The Interagency Working Group will propose topics and subgroups for action and will be responsible for overall coordination of these subgroups.

17. The Secretariat of the Interagency Working Group will be provided by the United Nations Statistics Division. The Division will report annually to the United Nations Statistical Commission on the work of the Group. Tools to facilitate communication and exchange of information among members of the Interagency Working Group will be developed.

18. The Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics will meet regularly, at least once a year, preferably back-to-back with convenient international meetings.

## IV. Plans for 2004-2005

19. In its methodological work the Interagency Working Group will focus on the joint development of consolidated guidelines for international water statistics based mainly on work carried out by Eurostat, the United Nations Statistics Division, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and earlier by ECE. Land use is an area where there is a rapidly growing demand for reliable and coherent statistics, and work on definitions and methodologies is urgently needed. It is therefore proposed to consider land use as a priority area for further work.

20. In data collection and dissemination, the Interagency Working Group will draw up an inventory of major official international environmental data collection activities and will prepare a consolidated data collection calendar for the participating organizations. It will continue to develop a core set of variables to be jointly collected for international purposes, without prejudice to specific data collection by the different organizations to satisfy their special needs.

21. In the area of technical cooperation, the workshops to be held by the United Nations Statistics Division in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and Economic Community of West African States regions, the ongoing environment assessment and capacity-building activities of UNEP in the developing regions under the Global Environmental Outlook (GEO) and related projects, Eurostat's environment statistics project in the Mediterranean countries organized through the UNEP-supported Plan Bleu, and the work of OECD on environmental data to support environmental performance reviews in non-OECD countries offer possibilities for joint activities.

22. A training workshop on material flow analysis in 2004 (organized by Eurostat together with the European Environment Agency) and a seminar on concepts, methods and best practices in water statistics in 2005 are the proposed joint events. The revitalization of the working sessions on methodological issues in environment statistics (organized in the past by ECE, later jointly by ECE and Eurostat) could be considered under the aegis of the Interagency Working Group.

## V. Points for discussion

23. The Statistical Commission may wish to review the suggested terms of reference and plan of work of the Interagency Working Group on Environment Statistics.